

'A remarkable woman'

Her life was dedicated to family, newspapers, community

By Kathy Tobin, Robert and Shad Branen
CONTRIBUTORS

A graceful, determined and remarkable woman passed away Friday, Sept. 10.

Nancy C. "Nan" Branen, 91, known for her love, determination and gentle spirit by those closest to her, succumbed to congestive heart failure at her home in Burlington.

A Burlington resident since 1951, she was married to William E. "Bill" Branen, former publisher of Southern Lakes Media Inc.

Following Bill's death in 1988, Nan became the majority shareholder and chairman of the board of Southern Lakes Media Inc. and Walworth Newspapers Inc., the parent corporations that operated the Burlington Standard Press and nine other area newspapers. She served as chief financial officer of SLM until the company sold in 2001 to Southern Lakes Newspapers LLC. Her love of the newspaper industry saw her perform many roles over six decades.

"I was fortunate enough to have started my career – then as a compositor – with the Standard

Press in 1983 under the ownership of Bill and Nan Branen," said Sue Z. Lange, the current general manager for Southern Lakes Newspapers. "Nan was our behind-the-scenes leader who always greeted you with a smile and had a genuine interest in how you were doing. She helped out in every department and had a special way of putting one at ease even in the flurry of daily deadlines."

Children came first

Nan was extremely proud of the part she played in raising three children while working behind the scenes and helping to create a "newspaper family."

She once wrote, "My No. 1 claim to fame is being the mother of Kathy, Bob and Shad, who are all journalism graduates of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They were all active in our profession."

Kathy, Bob and Shad all worked as newspaper publishers at points in their careers.

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SUBMITTED PHOTO *Standard Press*

Nancy "Nan" Branen holds a first day issue cover of a postage stamp commemorating her 85th birthday. Branen died Friday at the age of 91.



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Former U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan (center) takes a moment to greet his "Second Mom" at a Burlington campaign event. He is joined by (from left) Bob Branen, Nan Branen and Shad Branen.

• Branen (Continued from front page)

"One of my early memories is the assembly line my parents formed at home around the kitchen table when it was billing time," said Bob. "Mom was the bookkeeper, Dad would inspect the statements, and all three of us kids would fold the bills; stuff, stamp and seal them in the mailing envelopes. This process began at a very early age."

Nan's pride in the newspaper industry motivated her to help create a high school scholarship program through the Wisconsin Newspaper Association Foundation. The Branen Scholarship continues awarding funds to high school newspapers at the WNA Better Newspaper Contest.

When her children left the nest, she ventured into hands-on newspaper management in Poyntette, Reedsburg and Evansville.

Pioneering pilot

"Besides her love of newspapering, she loved flying," said Bob — who took the SLM reigns for a decade in the 1990s and is now retired in Florida. "Mom hoped to save Dad time on his many trips when he was president of the National Newspaper Association. She worked hard to obtain her pilot's license and flew him to meetings around the country as far east as Atlantic City and as far west as Denver," Bob remembered.

"Her Claim to Fame No. 2 was being the second woman to earn a private pilots license in the City of Burlington," stated Kathy. She was a local member of the national women's pilot organization, The Ninety-Nines Inc., fondly called the 99ers.

"Seeing her (Nan) getting her pilots license, you knew flying was a love for her besides her family," observed Mayor Jeannie Hefty of Burlington.

"Mom worked to form an Air Explorer Scout unit at the Burlington airport to teach flight ground school," Bob said. "And I was one of the first students."

She was involved with the Experimental Aircraft Association and chaired publicity

for EAA's annual air show in Burlington, prior to EAA's move to Oshkosh. Her flying, including a seaplane rating, continued until her heart condition made it impossible for her to pass a flight physical.

"A love for photography became an important part of her life in her later years. She carried her camera everywhere and sought out natural beauty and historic moments," Kathy said. "Her imagination was unleashed after learning Photoshop, which turned her photos into wonderful works of art, many of which were sold and auctioned off, often for charity events."

"She also incorporated her photos into storybook CDs. As a more recent example, she patiently followed the progression of the Veterans Terrace construction and presented the local history as a gift."

"She created family CDs of each year's events, putting them all to music," Kathy continued. "And, she made her own greeting cards, complete with personalized verses and 'I Knew I Could!' a Nan Branen Original' logo on the back," Kathy added. "Her Christmas and birthday cards were works of art to be treasured."

A second mother

"Many people noted she had a grace and elegance about her," said Shad. "She befriended everyone she met, and many consider her their 'second mom.'"

One person who often said, "Hello, Mom," when greeting Nan is Paul Ryan, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

"She was an amazing woman," he said. "Nan was the glue that kept Burlington together for many decades. She was an integral part of the community in so many different ways. I think she was a foundation stone for not just Burlington but Southern Wisconsin in keeping our community informed, engaged and building a civil society in what we've come to know and love as Burlington. It's people like Nan Branen that make communities like Burlington

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— Paul Ryan, former U.S. House Speaker

thrive and prosper and a great place to live and raise a family. She will be sorely missed."

Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Robin Vos echoed Ryan's comments. "Nan was truly special and a real treasure to our community. Her dedication to Burlington and willingness to always step in to help over the years has been a great example of why people love living here."

Burlington Mayor Hefty said Nan left a lasting impression on her, even at a young age.

"I was honored to first meet Nan when I was in junior high," Hefty said. "I remember her even at my young age so clearly as a woman of grace."

Hefty said Nan was so proud of her children, and the recent victory Shad had in pursuing a seat on the city council.

"The night he won and was sworn in she was so full of emotion," Hefty said. "We were blessed she was able to see that in her lifetime."

Action throughout life

Over the years through her newspaper background, she found herself mingling with elected officials and dignitaries, including U.S. presidents and press secretaries at White House receptions.

"Sometimes she would open up her own home to host special visitors such as U.S. Sen. Gaylord Nelson when he came to Burlington to plan one of the first Earth Day events," Kathy recalled.

She hosted other events for Sen. William Proxmire, Rep. Henry Schadeberg, Rep. Les Aspin and Major League Baseball Commissioner Allan "Bud" Selig.

During the final few years of her life, as her heart became weaker, Nan was deter-

mined to stay active. She continued to live at home, finding ways to adapt to her weakening condition. She spent hours on her computer working on family history, making greeting cards and balancing the daily cash sheets for Shad's businesses, Plaza Theater and Geneva Theater.

In addition to organizations listed above, Nan volunteered at the Burlington Area Chamber of Commerce, and had been a member of the American Legion Auxiliary, Burlington Woman's Club, Burlington Historical Society, Friends of the Burlington Library, Catholic Central Roundtable and secretary, treasurer and vice president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association Foundation. She also judged Sen. Herb Kohl high school scholarship applicants and judged for the State Historical Society for the "Governor's Archives Award."

"Her life was so full," Bob said. "She had the mental and physical willpower to overcome so many obstacles. Her final life's goal was to stay at home until her last breath. Of course, it's only fitting she accomplished that goal, too!"

-30-

Journalists traditionally used -30- to indicate the end of a story or article. "Mom's life was a remarkable one," said Shad, "and it's only fitting that her story ends with that notation."

Nan's legacy continues, however, as she gifted her body to the Medical College of Wisconsin for education and research.

A traditional obituary appears elsewhere this edition.

Kathy Tobin and Robert and Shad Branen are Nancy Branen's children.